

with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD). Some of the more common traits of adult AD/HD may interfere with the father-child relationship. If you're a father with AD/HD, here are some practical ways to manage these behaviors and build satisfying relationships with your children.

To begin with, your understanding of the meaning of a good relationship with your child may be affected by the kind of relationship you had with your own dad. It is important for you to examine this relationship by asking yourself the following questions:

- Do the images I carry of my dad leave me feeling numb or do I have positive memories of my relationship with him?
- Do I feel that my dad accepted me growing up?
- Did my dad ever tell me that he loved me?

If you carry negative memories of your relationship with your dad, chances are that your experiences growing up have greatly affected how you react to your own children, especially during AD/HD-charged moments. If your own dad was indifferent or overly critical of you, you may have grown up feeling incompetent, unwanted or worthless. As a result, you may retreat from your responsibility as a parent, feeling weak and helpless, or you may attempt to control your children by being overly strict and unyielding. You may distrust others, and because of your AD/HD symptoms, you may have struggled greatly with poor self-esteem due to multiple life failures.

It is important that you recognize that your own father also may have had a poor relationship with his father and that he once craved love and respect even though he was—or is—unable to show these needs. The one thing you can give your father that he may not be able to ask for is forgiveness. By forgiving your father, you are releasing negative feelings from inside that may adversely affect the way you parent your own child.

The next step to improving your parenting skills is to make sure you are receiving adequate treatment for your AD/HD. You can't help your child if you don't first help yourself. You need a doctor who is knowledgeable about AD/HD and its treatments. You might benefit from medication. If you have problems with anger management, substance abuse or compulsive behaviors, you may also need a trained therapist or counselor skilled in these areas. Working with an AD/HD coach can also be extremely helpful. Other sources of support can come from a local CHADD chapter, Attention Deficit Disorder Association (ADDA) or a men's support group, as well as from parenting classes, books and pamphlets.

## **Other Stumbling Blocks**

There are specific problems dads with AD/HD may encounter when parenting children—especially children who also have AD/HD. Among them:

- Chronic communication barriers can result from poor social skills, anger management deficits and a low threshold for tolerating frustration.
- **Inconsistent behavior** can be a great source of stress in the relationship.
- Overreacting to the child's negative behaviors is frequent among dads with AD/HD. There may be a tendency to react impulsively in these situations.
- **Being overwhelmed** by your children's school issues, such as assisting with homework assignments and aiding them in completing their work on time, can be stressful for both you and your children.
- Conflicting demands on time may complicate family dynamics if one child has AD/HD and requires a

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Editor's Note: The Spanish translation of this article begins on page 40. great deal of attention. Other children may feel slighted if your attention is dominated by the sibling with AD/HD.

- Inability to set appropriate boundaries can lead to a lack of respect of personal space in the relationship.
- Marital problems secondary to your AD/HD symptoms can often exacerbate the child's AD/HD symptoms.
- Lack of consistency related to AD/HD traits can affect the ongoing stability of intimacy within the family and the build-

ing of trust between adult and child. It can also have a detrimental effect on your ability to discipline effectively.

■ Time management and prioritization problems can reduce the amount of quality time spent with your child.

There are several important truths that you must keep in mind when developing a new fathering style. Know that you are significant and can make a difference in your child's life. Know the power of your presence in your child's life or the void that you create in your absence. Know that your child needs your love, approval, encouragement, acceptance and affirmation. Be committed to replacing bad habits with better ones. Be committed to helping your child succeed no matter what it takes. Finally, you must believe that it is NEVER too late to change yourself and effect positive change in your relationship with your child.

Here are additional ways to improve your relationship with your child:

Practice healthy communication to strengthen your relationship. Communicate with your child in a spirit of love. Never ridicule or make fun of him or her. Don't try to talk something out if you feel emotionally charged or out of control; wait until you feel calm enough to address the issues as objectively as possible. Learn what pushes your buttons and take steps to ward off overreaction. Be a model for resolving conflicts peacefully. A good listener talks



less and asks more questions—especially those that are open ended, do not require yes or no answers and foster better communication. Establish good eye contact and do not interrupt.

- Express the high value you place on your child. Use every opportunity to give praise, to say "thank you" or to share something inspirational with your child. Provide hugs and pats on the back when appropriate. Write words of encouragement on a sticky note and place it where your child will see it. Make sure your positive comments about, or to, your child greatly outnumber those that are negative—and that the negative ones are given in a constructive manner, without belittling your child.
- Schedule meaningful time with your child. Children, in a sense, spell love T-I-M-E. Make certain that the time you spend with your child is free from any distractions that would prevent you from focusing your attention completely on him or her. Communicate to your child that you will always try to be available during unscheduled times as well.
- Teach your child self-help skills that you have used to overcome your own difficulties caused by AD/HD tendencies. It is important to teach him or her to think independently, ask questions and seek creative solutions. Help your child find his own answers. Practice being slower with your advice.
- Set realistic goals for yourself and for

your child. Establish a plan and commit to it. For example, your goals could include being a better listener, paying more attention to your child's unique style and talents or striving to empower your child to be more resilient. Goals for your child could include developing more confidence, contributing in positive ways to society (like helping people in need) or being a good citizen. Monitor the progress of your goals at monthly and yearly intervals. Progress for your child could

be measured by his or her ability to solve problems independently or to assume more responsibility.

Most importantly, show your child unconditional love. This cannot be overemphasized. A solid trust between the two of you will remind your child that he or she can talk to you about anything. Your child also needs to know that he or she can always depend on you.

Dads with AD/HD can build loving relationships with their children. Personal skills related to fathering are important in all families, but for the dad with AD/HD, dealing with his own condition through diagnosis and treatment is a good first step to parenting. In spite of past mistakes and failures, it is never too late to heal a broken relationship. Start today; make a difference in your child's life. ■

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